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SUBJECT: A GENERAL OVERVIEW OF COLOMBIA'S SECURITY SITUATION

Classified By: Ambassador William B. Wood, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

1.(C) With USG assistance, Colombian President Alvaro Uribe has made great strides in fighting drug trafficking and terrorism. Uribe's hard-nosed security polices have eliminated the National Liberation Army (ELN) as a military threat, put the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) on the defensive, and continued to pressure the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC) and other paramilitary groups in the midst of an on-going peace process. The security forces have captured or killed key FARC leaders, initiated a multi-phased, nationwide campaign to attack the FARC in its rural strongholds, and reestablished a presence in all the country's 1,098 municipalities. Inter-service and civil-military cooperation, although imperfect, are growing. Colombia's human rights situation is still poor, but has been improving for the past several years. Three U.S. citizens have been held hostage by the FARC for over a year now. Their safe recovery continues to be one of our top priorities. End Summary.

U.S. ASSISTANCE TO COLOMBIA

12. (C) Colombian Minister of Defense (MOD) Jorge Alberto Uribe has characterized U.S. assistance as key to the GOC's "Democratic Security Policy" and acknowledges the U.S. as Colombia's most important ally. Assistance to Colombia is premised on combating the interrelated issues of drug trafficking and terrorism and includes training, material aid, and guidance to the security forces and other institutions. For example, we provided guidance when the Uribe administration developed Colombia's first-ever national security strategy. We enjoy a close working relationship with the Colombian security forces, especially with the MOD, Armed Forces Commander General Carlos Alberto Ospina, Navy Commander Admiral Mauricio Soto, Air Force Commander General Edgardo Lesmez, and National Police Commander General Jorge Daniel Castro.

Uribe is Showing Results

13. (SBU) Nearly 21 months into his four-year term, Colombian President Alvaro Uribe has made the country safer and more stable economically. Uribe's hard-nosed security policies have put the FARC on the defensive, reduced the ELN to a terrorist -- rather than a military -- threat, and continued to militarily confront illegal paramilitaries in the midst of an on-going peace process. Colombian military pressure has cut terrorist attacks on vital infrastructure by nearly 25 percent, is depriving illegal armed groups of important drug trafficking revenue (coca cultivation was down 21 percent in 2003), and is leading to a growing number of desertions from all three terrorist groups. The military has enjoyed over 75 percent approval ratings since 2001 and Uribe himself enjoys nearly 80 percent approval, which is higher than any other Latin American leader.

14. (C) In late 2003, Uribe named a new military high command and Defense Minister with an eye toward improving civil-military and inter-service cooperation and rewarding officers with a solid record of operational accomplishments. Recently, the security forces have achieved some notable successes:

-- Plan Patriota Moving Forward: The military's multi-phased campaign to re-establish control over national territory and cripple the FARC has entered its second major stage (2B), an approximately 18 to 24 month-long phase to target FARC-dominated regions in southeastern Colombia. General Ospina is personally involved in Phase 2B operations. Preparation, reconnaissance, and other important operations have already begun. Nine mobile brigades, two infantry divisions, two riverine task forces, two Air Combat Commands (CACOM), and at least two brigade-equivalent special forces units are devoted to this offensive phase. Progress is slow, however, given the vastness of guerrilla-controlled territory, the difficulty of the terrain, and the shortage of

air and water transport, plus the conservative fighting tradition of the Colombian Armed Forces. Much of this area has had little or no state presence for decades. During the campaign's first phase (2A) in 2003, the military dealt the FARC heavy blows in Cundinamarca department, which surrounds Bogota, killing many important mid-level commanders and destroying the FARC's 22nd Front and several special mobile columns.

-- Key FARC Leaders Captured: On February 10, the Army captured Nayibe Rojas (alias "Sonia"), chief of finances and logistics for the FARC's Southern Bloc, who was wanted in Colombia on drug trafficking charges and is under active investigation by U.S. authorities. In early January, Ecuadorian law enforcement authorities, in collaboration with Colombian counterparts, arrested senior FARC commander Ricardo Palmera (alias "Simon Trinidad") in Quito. Palmera and Rojas are the two most senior FARC leaders ever to be captured. Other important operations have been launched against top FARC commanders, including Jorge Briceno (alias "Mono Jojoy") and Tomas Medina (alias "Negro Acacio") -- in the largest airborne operations ever conducted by the Colombian military. Although these operations missed their targets, they served as confidence builders for units using intelligence-based plans to conduct operations deep in FARC-controlled territory.

-- State Presence Established Nationwide: Upon taking office, Uribe pledged to establish a permanent security force presence in the 158 municipalities (equivalent to U.S. counties) that lacked a military or police garrison. As of January 4, all 1,098 municipalities had a police presence. The USG facilitated this effort by training numerous police units and building hardened police stations. The Uribe administration will need to follow up this achievement with social services in isolated communities.

-- In late 2002, the GOC initiated negotiations to demobilize Colombia's largest illegal paramilitary organizations, including the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC) and Central Bolivar Bloc (BCB). In late 2003, over 1,000 paramilitaries demobilized and began reinserting into civilian life in two mass demobilizations. Several larger demobilizations are expected this year. We have urged the GOC to establish clear roles for all agencies involved in the demobilization process, including the Ministry of Defense, which will be responsible for security in demobilization zones and areas formerly controlled by paramilitaries, as well as other aspects of the reinsertion process. Paramilitary groups have not perfectly obeyed the requisite cease-fire. For this reason, the security forces have continued to confront paramilitaries militarily. At least 11 paramilitary field commanders have been captured since July.

15. (C) President Uribe, the MOD, and the High Command have emphasized that inter-service and civil-military cooperation and intelligence-based operations are key to success. General Ospina has taken significant decisions to move the Colombian military towards more joint operations, and Plan Patriota's task force composition is a clear example of jointness. Nevertheless, long-standing institutional rivalries are an on-going challenge. Recently, two events further dampened Police-Military relations and highlighted communication problems: in March, an Army unit in Narino Department killed several police officers. It remains unclear what actually happened, and accusations have surfaced that the police, military, or both may have been involved in illegal activities and/or tried to manipulate evidence during the ongoing investigation. In February, the FARC attempted to commit a complex mass kidnapping in Neiva, Huila department, that included a diversionary attack on an isolated military outpost that left at least 12 soldiers dead. A quick police response prevented most of the kidnappings, but the Army failed to respond to either the kidnappings or the five-hour siege of the military outpost.

GOC Generally Attuned to Human Rights

16. (C) The GOC maintains an active human rights dialogue with international and national NGOs, as well as the United Nations and foreign governments. Human rights training is mandatory for all members of the military and police, and the Embassy vets units that receive USG assistance. The State Department 2003 Human Rights Report on Colombia (published in March 2004) gave Colombia an overall rating of "poor," but noted that GOC efforts to improve security had led to major improvements in key human rights and violence indicators. For example, homicides fell by 20 percent, kidnappings by 30 percent, and forced displacements by 49 percent in 2003. Less than 2 percent of human rights violations are attributable to government security forces. However, most Colombian NGOs -- which generally lean to the left -- remain severely critical of the GOC. Recent missteps by the armed forces, such as the aforementioned police-military clash in

Narino and an accidental killing of a family of five by the Army on April 10th, show there is still a need for further improvement in respect for human rights by the security forces.

FARC Continues to Hold U.S. Citizens Hostage

17. (C) In February 2002, a DOD plane carrying four USG contractors and a Colombian military representative crashed in FARC-controlled territory in southern Colombia. The FARC killed one of the U.S. contractors and the Colombian and took the other three U.S. citizens hostage. We believe they are being held in a remote, heavily forested region the FARC has long controlled and to which the Colombian military has little or no access. Since the contractors were kidnapped, we have worked closely with the GOC to track all leads that could reveal their location. President Uribe has personally pledged complete GOC cooperation and support in any effort to rescue the hostages. As part of our efforts to secure their recovery, we recently initiated the Rewards for Justice Program, which offers up to USD five million in exchange for information leading to the capture of FARC commanders or other individuals involved in the kidnapping.

WOOD